

Plenty of good reasons to remain an Illinoisan

 chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-illinois-census-bureau-population-decline-moving-to-denver-perspec-0403-md-20170331-story.html

John McCarron

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Please. Will the last Chicken Littles to leave Illinois remember to turn off your lights?

After all, those of us planning to stay need our sleep. It's been hard to get the doctor-recommended eight hours of shut-eye with so many instant experts constantly squawking and shining their searchlights in the wrong places.

We're talking here about the big whoop over Illinois losing population during the past three years with the biggest losses occurring in the Chicago region. The U.S. Census Bureau recently estimated Illinois lost 37,508 people in 2016 — more than any other state — with the Chicago metro area accounting for more than half that amount. Cook County alone "lost" 21,324 souls.

So right away Gov. [Bruce Rauner](#)'s office kicked into "I told you so" mode, as did the conservative pundits and think tanks behind the governor's push for so-called "reforms" that they say will boost our state's business climate.

"People are leaving," said a spokeswoman for the governor, which is why the governor wants to "make changes that attract employers and create good jobs."

"Illinois' dysfunctional government, weak job creation and ever-increasing tax burden help explain why," intoned an analysis by the tax-a-phobic Illinois Policy Institute.

Reporters for our great city newspapers and TV stations, meanwhile, fanned out in search of disgruntled ex-Illinoisans or, better yet, families packing their bags.

One young North Side couple told the Tribune they are moving with their newborn son to Denver, where on previous trips they discovered "how astonishingly clean and how fresh the air was and easy to breathe."

All of which sounds fairly alarming until you consider some of the facts surrounding the facts.

First, there's the distortion of big numbers. Illinois still has 12.8 million residents, so while losing 37,508 may sound like a lot — It's a smidgen less than the entire population of Park Ridge! — it's less than one-third of 1 percent.

Then there's the fiction that masses are "leaving." Fact is, most of the decline has been due to fewer immigrants and lower birth rates. Or, as the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning pointed out in its March bulletin: "CMAPs latest research on regional demographics attributes population decline largely to decreased immigration and declining births."

Instead of interviewing disgruntled bag-packers and trunk-slamers, the press might have rung up Mexico City and asked folks there why the bloom is off El Norte. Hint: the Great Recession, the slow recovery and now, a president who doesn't appreciate the economic value of immigration.

None of which is to say that Illinois doesn't have serious problems. Our tax burden isn't all that out of line with comparable states. Indeed, it's a bargain for retirees. But with nearly \$12.5 billion in unpaid bills and an unfunded public pension liability approaching \$130 billion, state income tax rates are almost sure to go up, and that exemption on retirement income may be peeled back.

So there's a dark fiscal cloud hanging over Illinois and, yes, that may prompt some people to move elsewhere. More impactful, I'd guess, is that a lot of well-off retirees — baby boomers mostly — much prefer Florida beaches and year-round Arizona golf to another blustery winter of shoveling snow.

Meanwhile, a more upbeat story is quietly unfolding among the young. Chicago is seeing an influx of digitally hip 20-somethings who know how to write software, analyze big data and market to their peers via social media. That's one reason major corporations from Boeing to McDonald's, from GE Healthcare to Google, are piling not just into downtown but warehouse warrens like Fulton Market. The digital future is bright for those prepared for it.

Keep that in mind the next time some rich guy tells you we've got to freeze property taxes for schools, or depoliticize the drawing of electoral districts just in Illinois, or impose term limits on elected officials.

It's all a crock. And by the way, young mom and dad, the air in Chicago is rated better than the air in Denver, which has a severe ozone problem. Enjoy your trip.

John McCarron writes, teaches and consults on urban affairs.